

“A PAINTER’S FANCY”:  
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI’S *LA BELLA MANO*

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In the chapter entitled “Sinking Star” in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, Jerome McGann includes *La Bella Mano* (1874-75; fig. 1) among Rossetti’s “repellant,” “repulsive,” and “vulgar” paintings about which Walter Pater “will have nothing to say,” not because, in all likelihood, he would never see them, but because of their “immense vulgarity” (150-51). Yet McGann argues less pejoratively that “even the worst of these late Rossetti works” (*Proserpine* [1873], *Astarte Syriaca* [1877], *A Vision of Fiammetta* [1878], and others) often “exude a vitality lacking in the best works of Millais.... The ‘intensity and inner glow’ that [Martin] Hardie and others rightly see in the watercolors have not left Rossetti’s late painted ladies” (151). Nor, it might be added, have some of the gifts that Rossetti’s paintings exhibited almost from the beginning: his gift as a colourist, his gift for giving physical expression to mental states, and his gift for making “small actualities ... vocal of lofty meanings” (W.M. Rossetti, “Introduction” 18). Whether *La Bella Mano* deserves any or all of the negative qualities that McGann attributes to it, or even possesses the “vitality” that he finds wanting in Millais’s works, is open to debate, but the fact remains that, as will be argued here, it displays all three of Rossetti’s gifts and, as McGann observes, the “intensity” and “vitality” – not to say, the “aura”<sup>1</sup> – that remained characteristic of his paintings until the end of his life.

“I have been hard at work on ... *La Bella Mano* ... for which you saw drawing & rough design,” Rossetti told Frederick Richard Leyland on 12 September 1874:

It will be the *very best of its kind* I have done – the head hair neck & and shoulders [modelled on Alexa Wilding] being now quite finished & much superior in quality to the Veronica [*Veronica Veronese*] which I have kept by me while painting. It is more luminous and better in every way. (*Correspondence* 6:571)